THE CONFERENCE BOARD

Union Membership

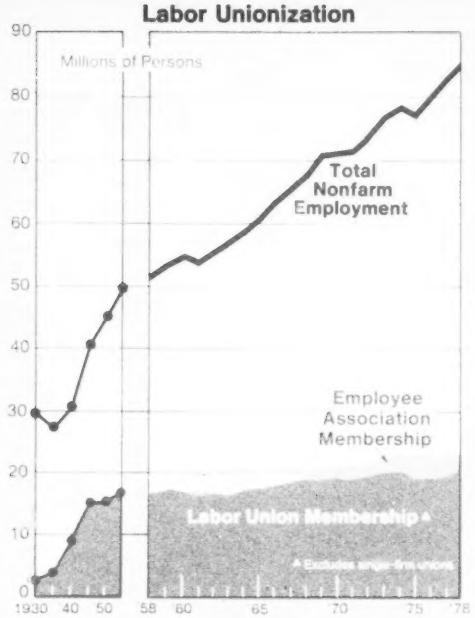
Economic Road Maps

No. 1882

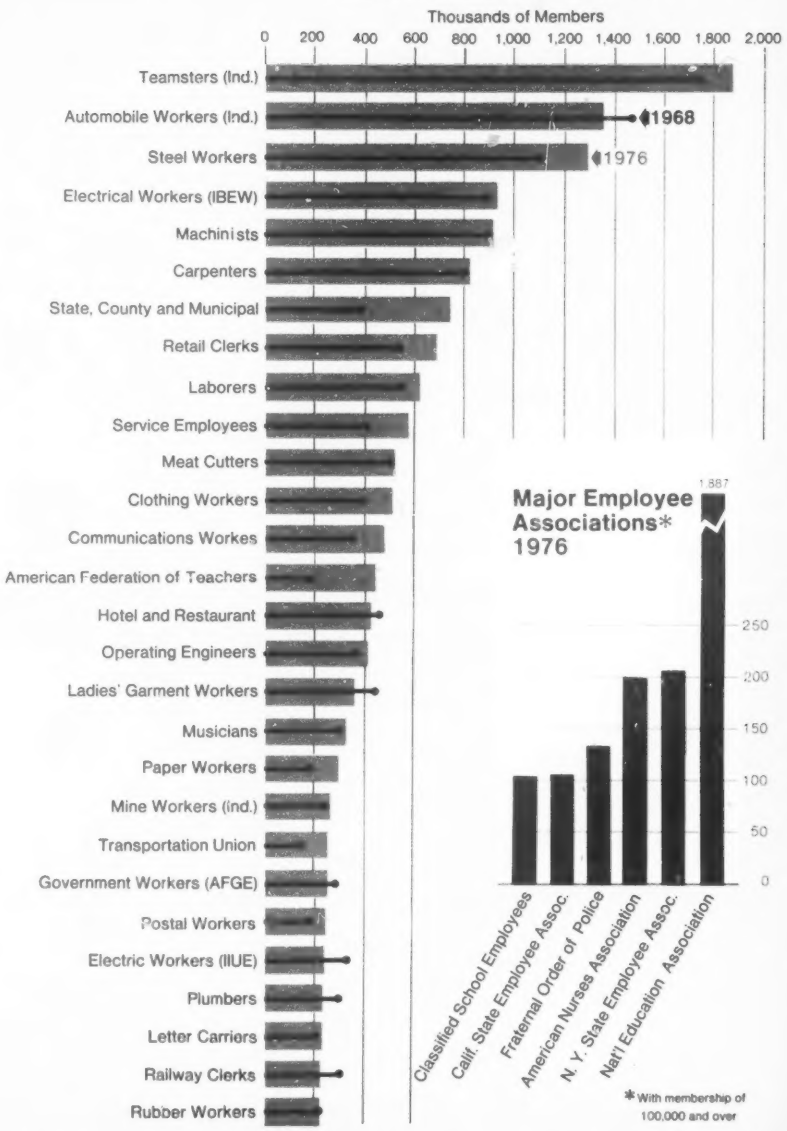
July, 1980

Union membership has not kept pace with employment. The number of workers represented by a union or an employee association reached a peak of 30% of nonagricultural employment in 1970. The figure had declined to 26.5% by 1978—the latest year for which data are available. Even the absolute number of union-represented workers has been eroding since 1974. Unions historically have been strongest among blue-collar workers in manufacturing, but the sectors of the economy that have been generating employment growth in recent years have typically been outside manufacturing. Moreover, such growth has been centered in white-collar jobs, where worker orientation to collective bargaining has not been strong.

Labor Unionization



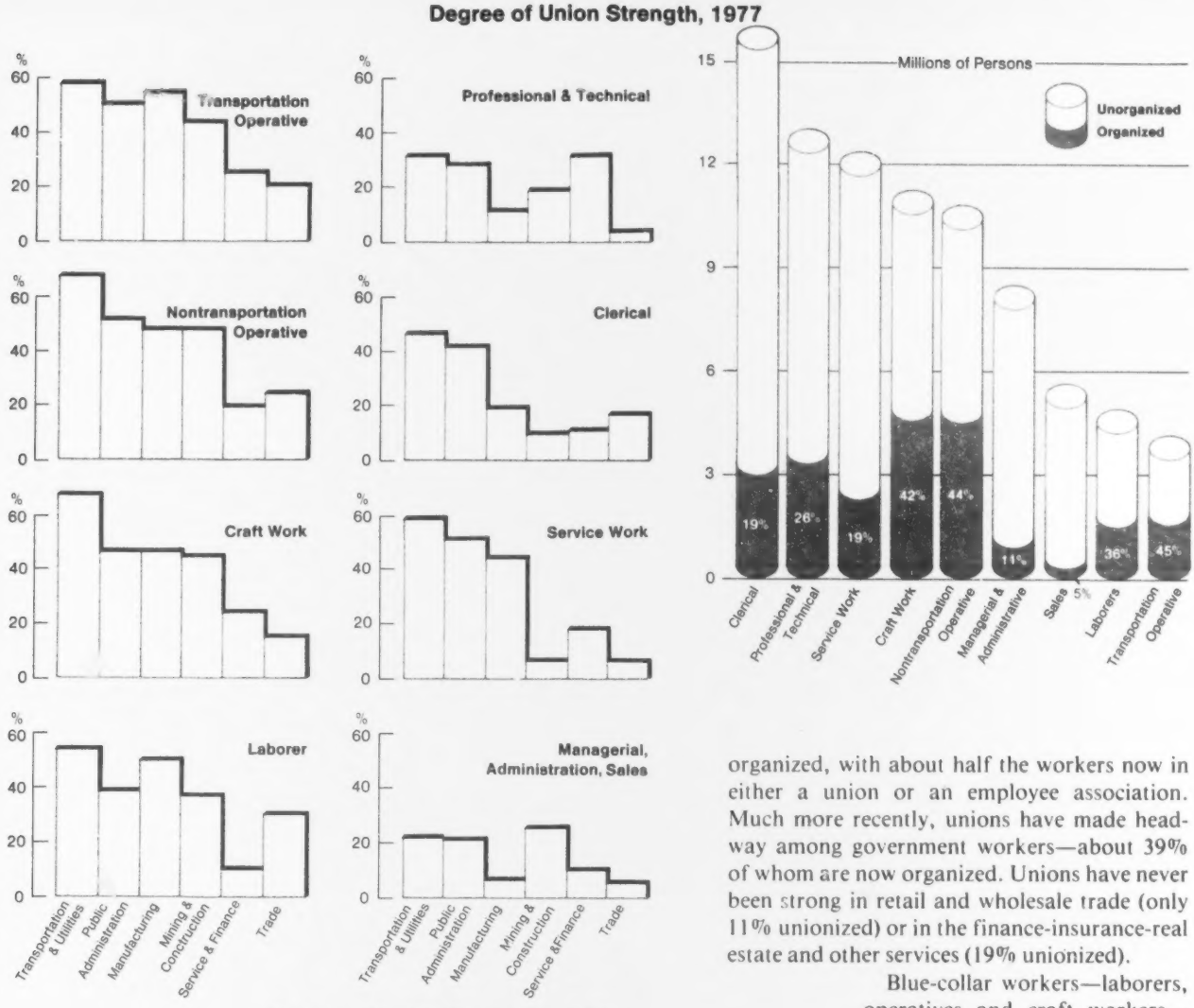
Largest National Unions, 1976



Major Employee Associations* 1976

The labor movement in the United States dates from the formation of unions among plumbers, carpenters, garment workers, and so forth late in the last century. And the core of the movement today is still to be found in unions representing blue-collar workers in manufacturing, construction and mining. Approximately 38% of all employees in those industries are organized under collective bargaining agreements. The transportation industry became heavily unionized earlier in this century; today, about 60% of employees in this sector are covered by union contracts. Somewhat later, communications and public utilities became heavily

Degree of Union Strength, 1977

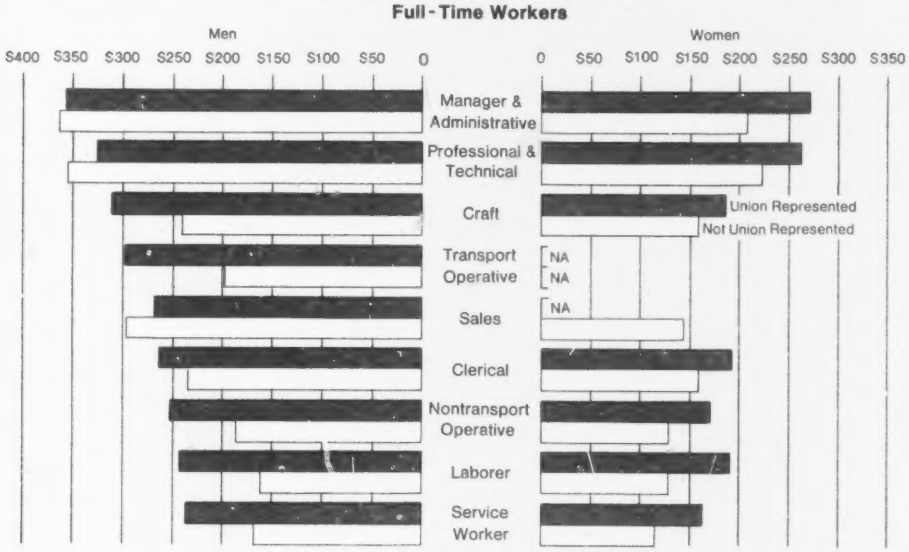


organized, with about half the workers now in either a union or an employee association. Much more recently, unions have made headway among government workers—about 39% of whom are now organized. Unions have never been strong in retail and wholesale trade (only 11% unionized) or in the finance-insurance-real estate and other services (19% unionized).

Blue-collar workers—laborers, operatives and craft workers—are the most heavily organized, although the degree of union strength in these occupations varies from industry to industry. (The name of the union often has little to do with the kind of worker the union represents. Examples of this abound: Teachers in Oklahoma City and sanitation workers in Chicago or Birmingham belong to the Laborers Union.) Unions have been least successful in organizing service workers, clerks, sales workers, managers and administrators.

Ken Goldstein

Average Weekly Earnings, 1977
Full-Time Workers



Sources: Bureau of Labor Statistics; The Conference Board.

ECONOMIC ROAD MAPS

Eva Galen, Editor — Chuck N. Tow, Lead Chartist

Prepared in The Business Conditions Analysis Department—Lora S. Collins, Director
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25 McArthur Road
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THE CONFERENCE BOARD IN EUROPE
Avenue Louise, 326—Bte 48
B-1050 Brussels, Belgium